

Housing Shortage (1926)

Abstract

Germany's rapid industrialization since the middle of the nineteenth century also fueled exponential urban growth, as rural workers moved into cities in search of better-paying jobs. The city of Essen, in the heart of the steel-producing Ruhrgebiet, offered a striking example of this development: Within just thirty-five years, Essen's population grew nearly six-fold – from just around 50,000 in 1875 to almost 300,000 people by 1910. Housing and infrastructure did not even begin to keep pace with accelerating demand, and most working-class city dwellers squeezed into cramped tenements, without adequate sanitary facilities, ventilation, or sunlight. The physical health and social well-being of inhabitants suffered accordingly.

The worsening nature of urban living spurred a number of reform programs in the Weimar Republic, some of the most influential of which stemmed from the Bauhaus, the innovative art-and-design school launched by the architect Walter Gropius (1883–1969) in the city of Weimar in 1919. Bauhaus architects designed buildings to maximize natural light and air, and they sought to reduce costs by using prefabricated elements. In 1926, the planned settlement of Dessau-Törten became Germany's first housing project designed according to the school's standards. That same year, Hermann Becker, the director of the Humboldt Film company, produced a four-part documentary film titled *Wie wohnen wir gesund und wirtschaftlich?* [How can we live healthily and economically?], inspired by one of Gropius's lectures. Gropius himself cooperated with the film's production, seeing it as a great way to popularize the Bauhaus's innovative housing ideas. The first part of the film, shown here and subtitled "Housing Shortage," focuses on the inhumane living conditions of urban workers. The footage shows dilapidated tenements, claustrophobic backyards, lightless apartments, and the overcrowded quarters of a homeless shelter. It also dramatizes—in scripted scenes with actors—the purported consequences of such living conditions: crime, alcoholism, and violence. Intertitles offer statistics to back up the film's explicit and implicit claims regarding the extent and consequences of Germany's housing shortage.

Source

Part 1: Housing shortage

16 million Germans live in big cities...

...and almost all of them live in tenements.

The main disadvantage of the 4-5 storey tenement is the narrow, lightless courtyards

These courtyards are created when houses are built with side and rear buildings in order to make use of every square meter of floor space.

Dark courtyards are veritable breeding grounds for vermin and disease

...and particularly disastrous for children.

In Berlin, 33% of all apartments have only 1 room and 40% have 2 rooms - and large families live in such cramped apartments.

Where the sun doesn't reach, a doctor will have to visit.

Here we see an overworked homemaker, in poor light in a dirty, musty apartment.

Another consequence of people living in such close quarters is gossip, quarrelling and bickering.

It is no wonder that these people without a home seek their recreation in the pub.....

...and when drunkenness, prostitution, and crime find their lairs here.

But the hundreds of thousands of people in emergency barracks and garden sheds, which serve as kitchens, living rooms and bedrooms, are not much better off.

Source: *Wie wohnen wir gesund und wirtschaftlich?*, dir. Ernst Jahn, Humboldt-Film GmbH, 1926.

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